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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001325

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: MEDIA SUPPORT FOR ARMENIA TALKS

Classified By: Ambassador Ross Wilson, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The Turkish media have reported "secret," high-level Turkey-Armenia talks on normalizing bilateral relations with little fanfare, but positively; the political opposition and their media outlets have not objected. Nor has the military. The media's approach suggests broad public support, or benign indifference, to these efforts. Azerbaijani objections are, more often than not, identified as the primary obstacle to normalizing Turkey-Armenia relations. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Mainstream Turkish daily "Hurriyet," on July 18, reported "secret" talks being held in Switzerland between Turkish and Armenian diplomats. The two sides were reported to be discussing, since July 8, opening the border, lifting Turkey's economic "embargo," initiating diplomatic relations, and legitimizing the status of around 60,000 Armenians residing illegally in Turkey.

¶3. (C) The media has interpreted the GOT's non-denial as a confirmation of talks. (NOTE: Armenian President Sargsian, in a July 21 press conference, referred specifically to talks in Bern. END NOTE.) Responding to a question about the reported talks during a July 18 press conference, FM Babacan stated that Turkey recognizes Armenia and has met "from time to time" with its Armenian counterparts, noting his meeting at UNGA last year with then-FM Oskanian. Existing problems, specifically disagreements about "the 1915 incidents," should be handled through dialogue, and diplomatic contacts are important for the normalization of relations. The MFA spokesman later stated that, within the framework of Turkey's long-standing recognition of Armenian statehood, contacts have taken place from time to time, including between members of the two countries' foreign ministries, and that no special meaning should be attached to these talks.

¶4. (C) Media coverage of Turkey-Armenia relations, including Sargsian's invitation to President Gul to attend a Turkey-Armenia World Cup qualifier in Yerevan September 6, has been largely positive. Columnist Oksay Ekti, in "Hurriyet" July 18, wrote that he hoped the talks would succeed, even as he was not optimistic they could, given what he viewed as Armenian irredentist claims on Mount Ararat and Turkish territory. Columnist Mehmet Ali Birand, in "Posta" July 22, wrote that it would be extremely beneficial for Turkey if President Gul travels to Yerevan to watch the soccer game (with Sargsian). He speculated that Sargsian made the invitation to appear sympathetic and surmised that, if Gul does not go, it would only reinforce Turkey's intransigent image. However, if he does attend, he would give the impression that Turkey wants to reach a compromise,

and Gul's attendance would boost the morale of the Turkish national team (the country's most trusted institution, according to a recent poll).

15. (C) Pro-government, Islamic-oriented (and pro-Turkey-Armenia normalization) "Zaman" reported July 19 that President Gul would use the occasion of a July 24 Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway groundbreaking ceremony in Kars (where Presidents Saakashvili and Aliyev will also be in attendance), to travel to the medieval Armenian city of Ani, just on the Turkish side of the border with Armenia. The paper called the planned visit a "conciliatory gesture wrapped in a message." (NOTE: MFA contacts have told us the only message Gul might wish to send by visiting Ani is that Turkey wants to restore it. END NOTE.) Numerous other papers have reported on the Ani visit, the talks in Switzerland, and Turkey-Armenia relations broadly, with little fanfare, though often noting the opposition Turkey will face from Azerbaijan in any push to normalize relations with Armenia.

16. (C) Turkey-Armenia relations have never been a societal problem for Turks, MFA South Caucasus Section Head Yavuz Kul told us July 23. The public could easily accept diplomatic relations and even the border opening; it is consistent with Turkey's approach to its relations with all its other problematic neighbors. Kul went so far as to suggest the Turkish public would not even demand the creation of a joint historical commission -- a technical issue -- though other Turkish institutions, like the military, could insist on such a step before allowing relations to fully progress. A far

ANKARA 00001325 002 OF 002

bigger challenge, he stressed, is Azerbaijan. Baku has built strong connections within the Turkish media and other institutions, and the Turkish public would be sensitive to any perception that Turkey has sold out its Azeri brothers.

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WILSON